



National Women's History Museum

**"I went to the Lord an' asked him to give me a new name. And the Lord gave me Sojourner, because I was to travel up an' down the land, showin' the people their sins, an' being a sign unto them.**

**Afterward I told the Lord I wanted another name, 'cause everybody else had two names; and the Lord gave me Truth because I was to declare the truth to the people." – Sojourner Truth**

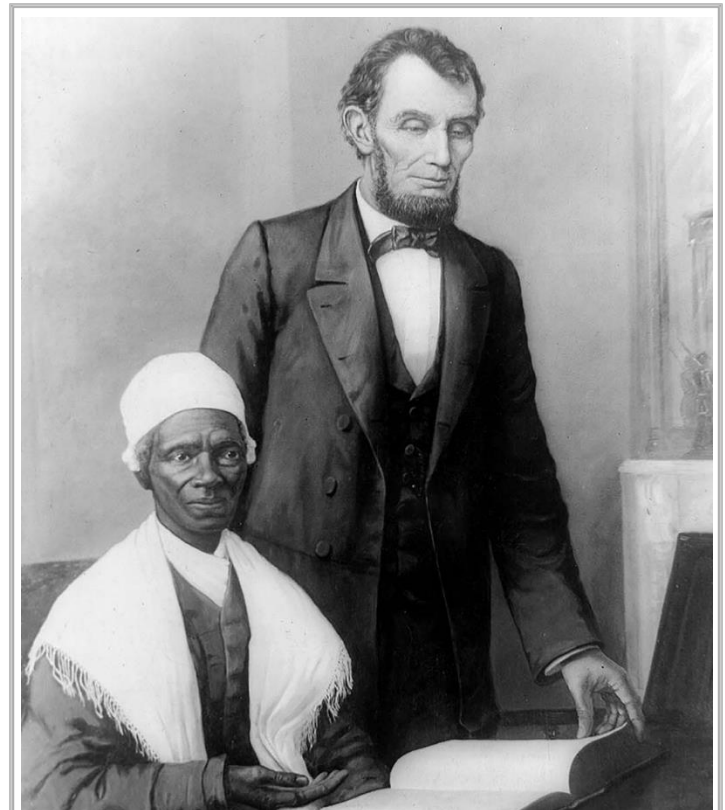
Sojourner Truth was born in 1797 and given the name Isabella Baumfree. She lived with her parents James and Elizabeth and her twelve brothers and sisters in Ulster County, New York. It was there in Ulster County that the Baumfrees were enslaved by Colonel Johannes Hardenbergh, Jr., and then later by his son Charles who had inherited the estate after his father's death. The Hardenberghs only spoke Dutch, so this was the first language of young Isabella.

Baumfree was separated from her parents when she was nine years old when slave owner John Neely bought her and some sheep for \$100. That amounts to just \$2,500 today. Her life was extremely difficult while enslaved on the Neely estate. She was routinely beaten for not understanding and speaking English. Although she would quickly learn this new language, it wasn't quick enough for her owners. Yet, in the midst of this dreadful situation,

Baumfree found religion and took comfort in it.

Baumfree was sold twice more in the following years, first to a tavern owner named Martinus Schryver in 1808, then to John Dumont in 1810. She remained enslaved by Dumont until her escape in 1826. Life under Dumont and his wife Elizabeth was horrific. She was harassed and assaulted repeatedly, all the while performing physically grueling labor and enduring harsh punishments. Five years after she was taken to the Dumont estate, Baumfree fell in love with an enslaved man from a neighboring property named Robert. However, Robert's owner forbade the relationship. One night while the couple met under the cover of secrecy, Robert's owner and the owner's son followed him, savagely beat him, and dragged him away; never to be seen again by Baumfree. Her first child Diana was born shortly thereafter.

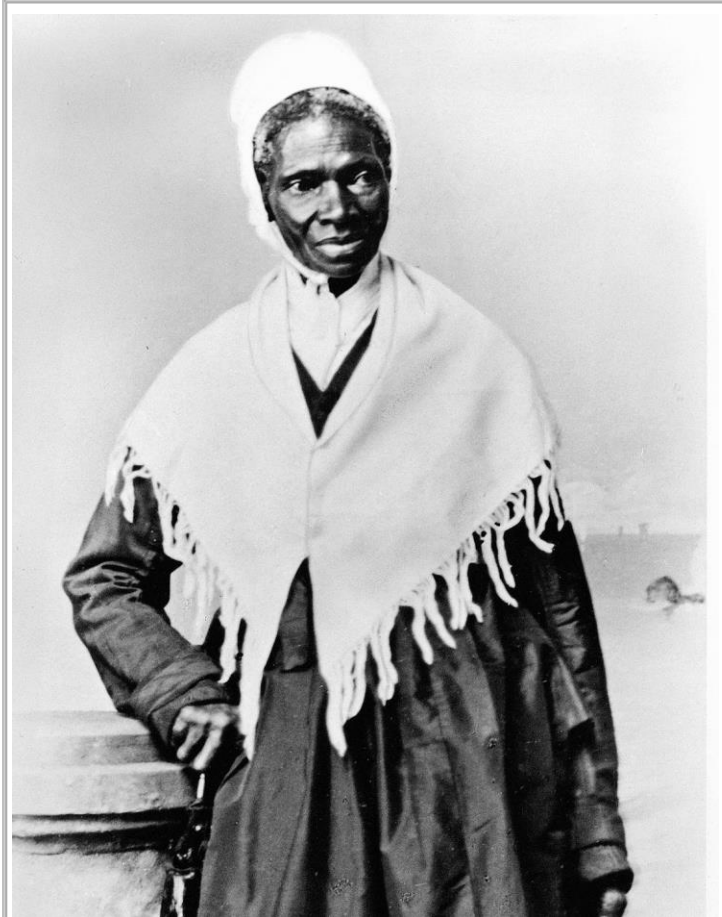
In 1817, Dumont arranged for Baumfree to marry an enslaved man named Thomas. It was during this marriage that she had four more children – Peter, James (who died in birth), Elizabeth, and Sophia.



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Freedom for Baumfree was finally realized in 1826, one year before New York's Gradual Abolition of Slavery Law required that any and all enslaved people who were born before July 4, 1799, would be set free. Realizing that Dumont would not follow to this law, Baumfree took the only child she could - her youngest Sophia - and escaped. She found refuge with a nearby Quaker family named Van Wagenen. Isaac and Maria Van Wagenen were abolitionists. Motivated by their love for neighbor, they morally opposed slavery. Baumfree was encouraged by the Van Wagenen's peaceful and loving example. She resolved to embrace religion even more in her life, and to love everyone, even her oppressors.

Baumfree moved to New York City in 1828 where she worked for a local minister. The following year, she officially became Methodist and joined the Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. Her faith continued to grow with each passing day. She became a charismatic speaker and a traveling preacher. Then, on June 1, 1843, Isabella Baumfree officially changed her name to Sojourner Truth, Sojourner because she traveled from city to city, and Truth because she spread the truth of the Lord. She traveled throughout New England and as far west as Kansas. Her faith motivated her to fight for the abolition of slavery, for temperance, and for civil and women's rights.



Britannica

In 1851 at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, Truth delivered what would become her most famous speech. It is titled "Ain't I A Woman?" In it, she emphasized the importance of equality between the sexes, and used her own life experience to exemplify the capabilities of women. She exclaimed, "If the first woman God ever made [Eve from the Book of Genesis in the Bible] was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again!"

Truth was renowned for her civilian service during the Civil War. She encouraged young black men to join the Union Army and fight for the freedom of their brothers and sisters in the south. Never forgetting those whom she encouraged to make this sacrifice, Truth arranged for supplies to be sent to the black troops, so they wouldn't go without. She was so influential, in fact, that she was invited to the White House to meet President Abraham Lincoln.

After the war, Truth would continue her advocacy efforts. She became involved with the Freedman's Bureau which, through an Act of Congress, was responsible for providing services to southerners who were displaced because of the war. Truth made sure that the people who were freed from slavery were among those who received services. Sojourner Truth, who tirelessly traveled the land preaching the Lord's truth, passed away on November 26, 1883, at the age of 86. Though her earthly life ended that day, her legacy of fighting for freedom, standing up for the oppressed, and ensuring the fundamental rights of all people continues to this very day.

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## Key Questions

1. Isabella Baumfree changed her name to Sojourner Truth because that name better reflected her vocation, or calling. If you were to change your name to better reflect your future vocation, what name would you choose, and why?

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## Sources

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